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A

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

ARCHDEACON's VISITATION,

HELD AT

BECCLES, in SUFFOLK.

[Price SIXPENCE.]

BRITISH MUSEUM

The eſtabliſhed Mode of Subſcription vindicated.

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On MONDAY *April* 18, 1774.

Publiſhed at the Requeſt of the Archdeacon and Clergy.

By JOHN BELLWARD, A. B.

RECTOR of BURGH-CASTLE, in *Suffolk*.

"Surely the preſent Form of Church-Government which the Laws of this Land have eſtabliſhed, is ſuch, as no Law of God nor Reaſon of Man hath hitherto been alledged of Force ſufficient to prove they do ill, who to the utmoſt of their Power withſtand the Alteration thereof. Contrariwiſe the other which in ſtead of it we are required to accept, is only by error and miſconceit named the Ordinance of Jeſus Chriſt, no one Proof as yet brought forth, whereby it may clearly appear to be ſo in very deed."

HOOKER's Pref. to his Eccles. Polity.

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MDCCLXXIV.

296

BRITISH MUSEUM

PROVERBS xxiv, 21.

My ſon fear thou the Lord and the King, and meddle not with them that are given to change.

THIS paſſage as it ſtands in the original, is capable of various interpretations, and has therefore been differently tranſlated. By the *Seventy* it is rendered "My ſon fear thou "the Lord and the King, and be not diſobe-"dient to either of them." By the Vulgate, "My ſon fear thou the Lord and the King, "and mix not, or aſſociate not thyſelf, with "evil ſpeakers". Each of theſe Tranſlations contains uſeful and conſiſtent advice: but I ſhall adhere to our own, as being more peculiarly applicable to the preſent times; in which too many are to be found, whoſe characteriſtic is, that they are "given to change." A diſpoſition no leſs deceitful than dangerous. It has a thouſand ways of inſinuating itſelf into the human mind; but its moſt common inlet is vanity. No ſooner doth a man entertain an high and fond conceit of his own abilities, but he begins to think meanly of others. Nothing can be well done, which he has not a hand in. Government through all its branches cries

aloud for his aſſiſtance. In the *State*, he ſees nothing but *grievance* and *oppreſſion*; in the *Church*, great want of *reformation*: Under this deluſion, he ſteps forth either the *Patriot* or *Reformer*. In the firſt character, we hear of nothing but lamentations for our *ruined Country*,—That tyranny with all its train of miſeries is coming upon us: and under theſe unhappy ſallies of imagination he "*ſpeaketh evil of dignities*," *fears* neither "the *Lord nor the King*;" but ſeemeth ſhould a fair occaſion offer, *ready to change*.

Or is our Church the object of his attention? with that too we find him equally diſſatisfied. *An human Formulary of religious faith and doctrine*, is there ſubſtituted for the pure word of God—*human Impoſitions* inſtead of the authority of Jeſus Chriſt alone, and to compleat the woeful piece, and to ſhew his ſuperior zeal and watchfulneſs for the proteſtant religion, he is under the moſt painful apprehenſions from the ſecret yet rapid progreſs of popery amongſt us.

In oppoſition to this latter character, ſhall the preſent diſcourſe be conducted. In which, after having made a few remarks upon the late attempt of our modern Reformers; I ſhall conſider ſome of the principal objections that are urged againſt the *eſtabliſhed Mode of Subſcription*.

The *Change* which they have been endeavouring to introduce, is this, That inſtead of ſubſcribing

ſubſcribing to our thirty nine Articles of Religion, every candidate be admitted into the Miniſtry and preferments of the Church, without giving any other teſt of his religious principles, than a general ſubſcription to the truth, and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures. This propoſal comes recommended to us, under the ſounding names of *reformation*, *proteſtant principles*, *religious liberty*, a *laudable Contention* for *the truth*, as *it is in Jeſus*, in oppoſition to *human inventions*, and *unſcriptural impoſitions*. Now as it is an eaſy matter to give bad names, ſo is it as eaſy alſo to abuſe good ones; and never ſurely was the name of proteſtantiſm more groſſly abuſed, than when applied to thoſe efforts which have been lately made againſt the Church of England. A Church which hath juſtly been conſidered both abroad and at home, as the ſtrongeſt bulwark againſt popery. A Church to whoſe purity of doctrine, and conſonancy with ſcripture and antiquity, the moſt learned of our foreign Proteſtants have borne teſtimony. A Church, whoſe principles breath nothing but moderation, and is ſo far from impoſing her doctrines upon others, that ſhe leaves every one at liberty to ſerve God in his own way, She compels none into her Communion, nor detains any with her againſt their conſent. Nay are her doctrines become diſagreeable, ſhe ardently wiſhes that the diſaffected members would remove either their prejudices, or themſelves from her; And this more particularly ſhe deſires

with reſpect to her Miniſters. In them ſhe thinks it highly diſingenuous and ungrateful, to "eat of her bread, and lift up their heel againſt her". Had it been a profeſſed and open enemy that had done her this diſhonour; had this attempt been made by thoſe, who from their infancy had imbibed prejudices againſt her, and who had never given any ſolemn aſſurances of their prejudices being removed, education might be pleaded in their favor. But that an attack ſhould be made upon her by thoſe, who by the moſt ſacred ties had engaged to defend her, who had repeatedly given their unfeigned aſſent and conſent to all her doctrines, is a conduct wholy indefenſible.

VINDICATIONS it is true have been offered, and all the forces of ſophiſtry called forth upon the occaſion. The oppoſers of this ſcheme have been branded with the opprobrious names of *Bigots*, and *Defenders of popery*. Nay the very principle upon which our eccleſiaſtical Conſtitution is founded, has been arraigned. The right which every community hath, of eſtabliſhing that religion which it believes to be the true one, and upon which baſis the church of England ſtands; ought it ſeems no longer to be defended. Becauſe we are told, that upon this principle, every, or any religion, be it ever ſo corrupt, may be eſtabliſhed, But we may aſk, if a principle be good in itſelf, muſt it be rejected, becauſe others may apply it to bad purpoſes? Muſt we throw away the ſword, becauſe in the hand of

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a ruffian it may do miſchief? There is a diſtinction, which they who would paſs this kind of reaſoning upon us for argument, either did, or would not attend to. And that is, that the right of eſtabliſhing a religion is one thing, and the exerting of that right, another. Becauſe every community hath a right to eſtabliſh a religion, it does not follow, that every, or any community has a right to eſtabliſh a falſe one. It is true this may ſometimes happen; but this ariſes not from any defect in the principle, or inherent right of the community, but from the abuſe of it. This very much reſembles the objection, which the infidel brings againſt Chriſtianity, viz. that taking in the animoſities, perſecutions, and bloodſhed which it has occaſioned in the world, mankind might full as well have been without it. Not reflecting that the true ſource of theſe evils, lies in the paſſions and corrupt prejudices of men, not in the Chriſtian Religion; this in its genuine effects producing nothing but the moſt extenſive benevolence, the moſt perfect unity and concord.

But the weakneſs of this kind of reaſoning will be ſtill further evident, by applying it to civil government. Every ſociety has an indiſputable right to eſtabliſh that form of government, which it thinks the moſt conducive to its general good. Would it not then be thought a ſtrange way of diſproving this right, to ſay that tyranny and deſpotiſm may be eſtabliſhed upon the ſame principle? And that to

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avoid this evil, it would be better for every individual to become a law to himſelf, or be ſubjected to no other reſtraints than what the dictates of reaſon lay him under—That every man has a right to interpret this law for himſelf, and that all other laws are but ſo many invaſions of his natural liberty. And what is thus urged in favor of the excluſive authority of reaſon, in oppoſition to all poſitive laws, might be admitted, if applied to perfect beings; but as applied to mankind in their preſent imperfect ſtate, nothing can be more abſurd, or more ſubverſive of human happineſs.

ANOTHER maxim which the oppoſers of * Subſcription urge in favor of their cauſe, is, *that every man has an undoubted right to interpret ſcripture for himſelf.* But will they ſay that every man, or moſt men have abilities to do this? They whoſe aim is to court or ſtir up the people, may affirm even this; may cry out as did Korah and his company againſt Moſes and againſt Aaron, *wherefore then lift ye up yourſelves above the congregation of the Lord? will thou put out the eyes of theſe men?* But whoever duely attends to the real ſtate of mankind; whoever will be guided by fact rather than prejudice, muſt confeſs that this poſition unleſs properly reſtrained, may prove very hurtful to the peace and order of ſociety. That every one has a right to interpret Scripture for

* By Subſcription here, and in other parts of this diſcourſe I mean (unleſs otherwiſe diſtinguiſhed) Subſcription in its preſent mode.

for himſelf, is no more to be conteſted, than that every man has a right (all circumſtances concurring) to be acquainted with the liberal arts. But where opportunity or abilities are wanting, which muſt be the caſe with the far greater part of mankind; what confuſion muſt enſue, ſhould every one from this right of interpreting Scripture, infer ability to do it? For from thence by the help of a little ſelf-conceit, which they who are weak enough to draw this inference cannot be ſuppoſed to want, they will proceed a ſtep further, and infer a right of preaching the Goſpel. What anarchy in the State, what diſgrace to religion muſt thence follow, let the fatal experience of the laſt century inform us.

But perhaps it will be here aſked, is the uſe of reaſon in religion to be denied to the bulk of mankind, are they to be precluded from the uſe of the Scriptures, are they utterly incapable of reaping any advantage from them? By no means: as far as they are able, and have opportunity, it is their duty to ſearch them, we exhort them to it, and our Church enjoins, that in all her public aſſemblies, a portion of them be read to the people. They contain very many and important truths, which lie level to the meaneſt capacities; but they contain others alſo hard to be underſtood, and ſuch as the *unlearned and unſtable may wreſt to their own deſtruction*. Theſe muſt be allowed upon the authority of an Apoſtle, to be unfit for the bulk of mankind to meddle with. But when

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with honeſt and humble minds, the unlearned, that is, the bulk of mankind apply themſelves to the oracles of God for information in their duty; their labour we truſt will not be in vain. This they are capable of; but does it follow, that they are capable of reaſoning upon them, of making deductions, and of ſhewing the relation of one duty to another? Are they capable of explaining the difficult, diſtinguiſhing the figurative, and reconciling the ſeeming contradictory paſſages? The truth is, *reaſoning* properly ſo called, is a talent which few are bleſſed with to any eminent degree. Many indeed, too many for the peace and quiet of the world, pretend to it: and to what do their diſquiſitions ſerve, but (in the language of ſcripture) "to darken counſel by words without knowledge"? This noble habit is not to be acquired without long exerciſe, much ſtudy, and intenſe thinking. But theſe cannot fall to the lot of the many. The queſtion therefore about the right of proteſtants to interpret ſcripture for themſelves, and about which, ſo much ſtir has been made; is rather calculated to amuſe, than to ſerve the cauſe for which it has been introduced. For even had it been ſuffered to paſs uncontroverted, the point which was aimed at under the diſguiſe of this queſtion, would not have been gained.

But the ſhorteſt, and perhaps the beſt way of anſwering this, and every other objection againſt Subſcription, and at the ſame time the beſt

beſt method of diſplaying the wiſdom of our eccleſiaſtical Eſtabliſhment; will be to give a view of the plan which the Civil Magiſtrate purſued in founding it. He firſt of all conſidered mankind as they really are, liable to great prejudices, and very many miſtakes; and no where more ſo, than in matters of religion. "How then (may he be ſuppoſed to have ſaid) ſhall we beſt provide againſt this natural infirmity, with reſpect to the miniſters of the Goſpel? Will it be more for the intereſt and ſafety of the people committed to their care, will the Goſpel be in leſs danger of perverſion and the authority of Jeſus Chriſt alone beſt preſerved, by leaving every miniſter at liberty to interpret the Scripture to our people as he pleaſes? May he not obtrude his own prejudices upon them for Scripture truths? May he not preach *himſelf* inſtead of *Chriſt Jeſus the Lord*? And may there not by this means, be ſuch a contrariety of opinions introduced, as may end in the ruin of our people and ſtate? Could we be ſecure againſt theſe dangers; could the induſtry, ſagacity, judgment and integrity of every miniſter of the Goſpel be relied upon, an unreſtrained liberty of interpreting the Scriptures might be allowed. But nothing leſs than *infallibility* in every miniſter of the Goſpel can aſſure us of this. What then is to be done? The Goſpel being the revealed will of God to man, muſt be preached. Miniſters by the inſtitution of its divine Founder muſt be ſent: and in all reaſon a reſpectable proviſion for their maintenance

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be made. This proviſion in proportion as it is ample, may induce many into the miniſtry of pernicious principles. To avoid this and its conſequent evils, the only ſafe and juſtifiable method will be, to ſelect the ableſt and beſt Divines of our kingdom; men who would not ſcruple to lay down their lives for the cauſe of truth. To theſe we will give commiſſion to ſearch the ſcriptures, and by unanimous conſent to declare, what, after due examination, appears to be the true ſenſe of their moſt important doctrines. And to this their interpretation clearly expreſſed, it ſhall be required, that every one before his admiſſion into the miniſtry and preferments of the Church, ſubſcribe his aſſent. Does any one object that we are hereby eſtabliſhing human formularies of faith and doctrine, inſtead of the Scripture doctrines of Chriſt? We aſk, are not the determinations of the wiſeſt, beſt, and moſt learned men of our kingdom, to be preferred before thoſe of an individual, and of one too, who may be neither wiſe, good, nor learned? Are not our people better ſecured from error and ſeduction, will they not have more reaſon to be ſatisfied that the doctrines of their teacher are the true doctrines of Chriſtianity, when they reflect that for this, they rely not upon his judgment only; but upon the concurrent teſtimony of the wiſeſt, ableſt, and beſt of our ſubjects? Whoever oppoſes this plan, under the ſpecious cover of zeal for the excluſive authority of Jeſus Chriſt; would do well to conſider,

ſider, whether in reality it be not his *own*, rather than his *Maſter's authority*, that he is contending for.

THE right then of interpreting Scripture for himſelf, to which every proteſtant lays claim; ought for the reaſons already given, to be reſtrained in a miniſter. Under this character the queſtion becomes changed; it is no longer whether he has a Right to interpret Scripture for himſelf; but whether he has a right to interpret it for others.

BUT here probably will be aſked if proteſtants have no right to interpret Scripture for others, how is the forementioned plan of the Civil Magiſtrate to be vindicated? What right has he to determine the ſenſe of Scripture for the Miniſters of the Goſpel? This queſtion however plauſible it may appear, has been already anſwered. For though no individual has a right to interpret Scripture for others; yet certainly the community or the Civil Power has a right to know the principles of thoſe who are Candidates for the miniſtry and preferments of the Church; has a right to reject from either of them, whenever they are found inconſiſtent with that ſenſe of Scripture, which after the fulleſt and moſt mature deliberation is declared to be the true one*

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* Strange! that this right of the Civil Magiſtrate ſhould be called in queſtion, when one ſimilar to it is allowed to every parent upon earth. And if it is not often exerciſed, it is becauſe he has no doubt of the rectitude of his religious principles, to whoſe care he commits the education of his children. But ſhould any

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BUT this we are told is making the determinations of men, and not the holy Scriptures the rule of our faith. This is an objection which the oppoſers of ſubſcription ſeem fond of; but, which after all is more ſpecious than ſolid: for before it can be allowed to have any weight, it muſt be proved that the determinations againſt which it is levelled, are not founded on Scripture; if they are, by whatever names they are called, they muſt be acknowledged to have the authority of God for their ſupport. But to ſhew the weakneſs of this objection ſtill clearer, let us take a Scripture propoſition, and try when differently worded, or in the more faſhionable phraſe, when put into an *human form*, whether its ſenſe may not be fully retained, clearly expreſſed, and conſequently as ſafely ſubſcribed, as when ſtanding in Scripture language. Let then the propoſition be this, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*; in other words, God who

one of ſuſpected principles make a tender of his ſervice; might he not from every laudable motive, from paternal affection, from a juſt regard to his children's welfare, reject ſuch an one from this office and its emoluments? Or would it be deemed a ſufficient recommendation of him to be told, that he firmly believed the Old and New Teſtament to be the revealed Will of God? A declaration ſo general, eſpecially if its ſufficiency were inſiſted upon, would increaſe rather than remove a parent's ſuſpicions. For in fact it is no ſecurity at all, it does not diſcover whether he that makes it, be a proteſtant or papiſt. Ought then the utmoſt care and circumſpection to be employed in the choice of a tutor to a private family, and ſhall none (or what is little better than none) be thought neceſſary, in chooſing the inſtructors of a whole people?

who is eternal gave being out of nothing to the whole viſible world. Now if the ſenſe of the above propoſition as it ſtands in Scripture, be here fully and clearly preſerved; why might it not be ſubſcribed as an article of faith, without infringement upon the divine authority of the Scriptures? Unleſs it be aſſerted that the authority of Scripture cannot be preſerved, without retaining the words as well as ſenſe of Scripture. But where its true meaning is preſerved, it ſeems no more to be conceived how its authority is loſt by being differently expreſſed, than how perſonal identity is deſtroyed by change of dreſs. Nay upon any other ſuppoſition, what becomes of the authority of all Scripture Tranſlations? Theſe alſo might be called *human formularies*, and doubtleſs would have been ſo, had they laid any reſtraint upon the liberty of late contended for. In that caſe we ſhould have heard of nothing but *the pure and original Scriptures*, nothing would then have ſerved, but a Hebrew and Greek confeſſional of faith and doctrine. But if we examine cloſely into that wonderful tenderneſs and anxiety, which the oppoſers of Subſcription expreſs, for the excluſive authority of the Holy Scriptures; we ſhall find it at bottom to be nothing more, than a fond and partial attachment to their own interpretations. And the merit of the controverſy might be reſted upon this ſingle queſtion; whether the true ſenſe of Scripture is not more likely to be found, by a conſulta-

tion of many wiſe and learned men aſſembled together, than when left to the diſquiſition of each miniſter by himſelf? Is it ſaid that Councils may err as well as individuals? It is granted, with every conſequence fairly deducible from it. We are ~~neither~~ not for infallibility in a general Council, much leſs in individuals; but ſtill we may inſiſt upon the truth of Solomon's obſervation, "that in the multitude of counſellers there is ſafety."

But the true nature of any Scheme will be beſt ſeen, by attending to its conſequences. We know that there is not any opinion, be it ever ſo extravagant, but what will ſome way or other impreſs the Scriptures into its ſervice; and which under cover of the *new mode* of Subſcription, may find an eaſy admiſſion into the Church. Its members by this means would hear from time to time every important doctrine of the Goſpel, by turns aſſerted and denied. If one while they hear all the divine nature of Chriſt clearly proved from Scripture; that he *is the brightneſs of his father's glory, the expreſs image of his perſon,* and that *in* him *dwelleth all the fullneſs of the Godhead bodily,* that *he was in the beginning with God, and was God,* that by him the worlds were made, and that he *upholdeth all things by the word of his power*—that his death upon the croſs was a propitiatory ſacrifice, an atonement to the juſtice of God for the ſins of men: at another, they may hear all this denied, and by one too, who

who profeſſes to make the Scriptures his ſole rule of faith, and doctrine. They may hear the Saviour of the world, affirmed to be nothing more than a *mere man*: that his death was not by way of *ſatisfaction* to divine juſtice; but only an atteſtation to the truth of his doctrine, and an example of patience and heroic ſuffering to his followers.—That though it is expreſsly ſaid that he came down from heaven; though he has affirmed of himſelf that *before Abraham was, I am*, they may notwithſtanding be told that he had no exiſtence before his incarnation. At one time they will be taught, that to work out their ſalvation, the grace or aſſiſtance of God's Holy Spirit is neceſſary; at another, that they are abundantly able of themſelves to accompliſh it—that the tranſgreſſion of our firſt parents had no influence at all upon their poſterity, and that our nature ſuſtained no injury from the fall. Theſe with numberleſs other contradictory doctrines, will be let into the church; and the minds of the people being thus agitated by diverſity of opinions, will know not where to ſettle; but will be in the utmoſt danger of falling, firſt into ſcepticiſm, and thence into infidelity. If theſe be more than viſionary evils, more than poſſible conſequences of the ſcheme under conſideration; every one who has the intereſt of Chriſtianity at heart, will think it his duty to oppoſe it.

INNOVATIONS of a public nature are ever dangerous, and generally productive of great-

er evils, than thoſe which they are meant to remedy. They ought therefore never to be attempted, but upon great and urgent occaſions. Not every trivial objection, which vanity, intereſt or diſaffection may ſuggeſt, ſhould be ſuffered to break in upon public Eſtabliſhments. The very beſt inſtitutions are not exempted from cenſure. Chriſtianity itſelf has its enemies: And were alterations to be made at the clamours and cavils of the factious and diſcontented, Government might be every hour varying its form. Never therefore does the wiſdom of the civil powers ſhine with greater luſtre, nor more effectually conſult the public good, than when it oppoſes attempts of this nature.

Our preſent mode of ſubſcription has been received with approbation, and its utility experienced for almoſt two centuries. Twice 'tis true it has been interrupted, and miſerable indeed was the ſtate of religion, during thoſe unhappy periods. Under the former, popery with all its cruelties of perſecution re-entered: Under the latter, raged its near ally, enthuſiaſm. Yet bad as this was, it was varniſhed with a good name, and called the æra of religious liberty, but it was that kind of liberty of which Scripture gives us an idea, where it tells us "that in thoſe days there was "no king in Iſrael, but every man did what "was right in his own eyes." Whether the plan adopted by our modern reformers might not be productive of the like ſcenes of confuſion,

uſion, is well worth their moſt ſerious attention. And let them further conſider, whether their over-flowings of zeal for the *proteſtant intereſt*, be conſiſtent with an attack upon the Church of England, among whoſe members have been found, the ableſt champions and beſt defenders of the reformed religion.

THE Character too of our firſt Reformers ſhould have ſome influence upon them: And though it be ſaid, that the authority of the greateſt names, ought to have no weight againſt the authority of God; yet true as this moſt certainly is, a deference is ſtill due, and modeſty will ever pay it to their diſtinguiſhed merit. In a word, they were wiſe, learned, and good men, every way fitted for that great and noble work to which Providence called them. And may we never ſee the venerable pile which they erected at the expence of their blood, injured or defaced by any modern pretences to reformation!

FINIS.

18 JA 53